The Question I Couldn't Answer

"Can I keep it?"

The young girl clutched the book so close to her heart that it seemed she would swallow it up completely.

"They were just supposed to be for one day," my fellow volunteer told her softly. "But we will bring them again next week."

"Oh."

That single utterance was so faint I nearly did not hear it at all.

She nodded anyway.

Then, with the greatest care I had ever seen, she smoothed the corner of the cover with her tiny hand before placing the book back into the cardboard box.

As though she was returning something far more valuable than paper.

I could not stop thinking about her.

Not while we packed the books.

Not during the drive home.

Not even later that night, when I walked past the bookshelf in my room.

I counted them.

One.

Two.

Ten.

Thirty.

Fifty-three.

Fifty-three books.

Some I had read three times.

Some I had forgotten I even owned.

Some were only there because I liked the cover.

I pulled one from the shelf.

There was my name, written inside the front page in messy handwriting from years ago.

This book belongs to Eman.

I smiled.

Then I stopped.

The girl I had met that afternoon did not even have one book with her name inside it.

Not one.

It’s odd.

They just existed.

On my nightstand.

In my school bag.

In the library.

On my mobile device.

And if I needed another, I would borrow it.

Download it.

Or buy it.

There were even times where I whined because I didn’t have any more interesting reading material to choose from.

Funny how invisible abundance becomes when you've never known anything else.

I still remember the way she looked at the illustrations.

Not quickly.

Slowly.

Like someone trying to make a moment last longer.

She laughed at pictures before she could even read all the words.

Every page felt like a place she wanted to stay.

When story time ended, she didn't ask for toys.

She didn't ask for sweets.

She asked for the book.

Can I keep it?

Three words.

Three words that silently transformed something within me.

People often say literacy is about learning letters.

I don't think it is.

Literacy is possibility.

It is the difference between choosing your own story and having life choose it for you.

A book is never just paper.

It is confidence.

Curiosity.

Questions.

Dreams.

A future that suddenly feels a little closer than it did yesterday.

I still own dozens of books.

Some are old.

Some are brand new.

Sometimes they gather dust while I tell myself I'll read them "next week."

Whenever I catch myself doing that, I think about the little girl.

I wonder whether she ever got a book of her own.

Whether someone finally wrote her name inside the first page.

Whether she still smiles every time she turns one.

I hope she does.

Because every child deserves to know what it feels like to close a book already wondering how the next story begins.

And maybe that's why I care so much about literacy now.

Not because I love books.

But because everyone deserves one, they don't have to give back.